31 Bittersweet Years

SAMUEL CLAESSON

Reiko Sato was born on December 19, 1931, in Los Angeles. Her father was Kenichi Sato, a Zen Buddhist priest from Mie Prefecture, Japan, who had sailed to California on the Tatsuta Maru to oversee a temple. He was a sharp contrast from his wife, Chieko Kyogoku, a devout Christian who worked as a server at a restaurant before investing in real estate. In addition, Reiko had two brothers named Keiichiro and Koji. Reiko began dancing at the age of four at the urging of her mother. Her father never got to see her progress as he and Reiko's brothers sailed back to Japan to study for the priesthood. Unfortunately, World War II began, and Reiko would never see her father again. If that weren't bad enough, Reiko was bullied and taunted by her classmates the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed. She, in her words, became the enemy.

Reiko and her mother were relocated to Yuma County, Arizona, and placed in an internment camp, as was common practice, especially on the West Coast, during World War II. It was a lonely period for Reiko. She had a lot of friends in Los Angeles, but her mother was firmer with her in this entirely Japanese community. She preferred that her daughter limit her association with other Japanese people, as she wanted her to assimilate with Americans and be westernized. It was despite this that she made quite the impression on others in the camp for her self-sufficiency and maturity. One of the captives, Charles Kikuchi, took notice of Reiko and recalled her mother being hated by the community for pandering to Caucasians. He said of Reiko that "her situation emphasized to me the lonesome aspect among the Nisei... she has a very unusual personality development for such a young child."

After the war ended, Reiko and her mother returned to Los Angeles. Her father had passed away in Japan from a bout of tuberculosis. She never saw her older brother Keiichiro again, as he chose to stay in Japan; he abandoned his plans of becoming a priest, founding Cosmo Public Relations Corporation in 1960 in Tokyo. He married Taeko Matsuda, the daughter of Takechiyo Matsuda,

who was Speaker of the Japanese Parliament and the Minister of Education. They had a daughter Kumi Sato, who would manage the business after Keiichiro's death. Reiko would resume her studies in ballet while finishing her education at Belmont High School. Kumi Sato, who was one of the wealthiest women in Japan, remembered her aunt as being anything but a traditional Japanese-American woman: "We'd fly her to Japan to visit with us. She was a heavy smoker who tried to quit by living on sunflower seeds and grapefruit juice. She was usually barefoot, didn't like wearing makeup, and wouldn't even iron her wardrobe. She resented being asked to wear jewelry when we'd go to dinner. Her glamorous onscreen image wasn't who she actually was."

After several gigs at festivals and nightclubs, Reiko started doing films. She appeared in *On the Town* (1949) and *Mother Didn't Tell Me* (1950). She was cast the following year in *Woman on the Run* (1950) after the star of that movie, Ann Sheridan, saw her act at Forbidden City and thought she had talent. Ann offered her the role of Suzie, a dancer who is murdered after discovering confidential information about the mafia. Walk-on roles in *Target Hong Kong* (1953), *House of Bamboo* (1955), and *Hell to Eternity* (1960) soon followed.

She left Hollywood to appear in *Kismet* on Broadway, which was a success. Jack Cole asked Reiko to reprise her role as the Princess of Ababu in the filmed version of *Kismet* (1955). She was reluctant, but agreed after the Mary Reeves Oriental Casting Service, who represented her, negotiated with producers to finance her relocating from New York to California.

Although films were lucrative, Reiko found more work onstage. She was Lotus Blossom in *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, which was so popular with audiences that MGM did a film version. That was when she met Marlon Brando, who was cast as Sakini in the film. He had seen Reiko onstage and went incognito to her apartment, asking her if she could teach him about being Asian so he could perfect the character that would later win praise from critics. They began dating shortly thereafter. It's unknown whether they were intimate, but they remained inseparable friends even during Marlon's romances with other women like Pat Quinn and Jill Banner who both liked Reiko a lot.

Reiko Sato's greatest onscreen role was in *Flower Drum Song* (1961). Her role of Helen Chao was immensely different in the script than it had been in C.Y Lee's novel Flower Drum Song. The novel depicted the character as being ugly, disfigured, and suicidal, while the script demanded she be glamorous yet lonesome. She got the opportunity to showcase her acting ability, appearing in various scenes as the community's go-to seamstress in a subplot where she falls in love with the main character (Wang Ta) while performing "Love Look Away," choreographed by Hermes Pan. The director, Henry Koster, was pleased with her performance, saying in his autobiography that "... They [the actors] were all the best known here... and I had a marvelous ballet dancer, Reiko Sato." The reviews from critics were positive. It was written in Newsweek that Reiko "manages to stand out simply by not playing her part as if she had to prove she was Oriental" while Box Office called her "praiseworthy."

Her last film was *The Ugly American* (1963) starring Marlon Brando, where she portrayed the role of Rachani. Marlon urged executives at Universal to approve her for this role, but they were concerned by her lack of abilities as an actress. He assured them that this wasn't an issue, and that he would personally coach her throughout the filming. As filming continued, Reiko's character expanded with additional pages of dialogue being added. This was a bit insulting to Marlon's wife Tarita Teriipaia, as the role was originally written for her yet only expanded when it was given to Reiko. Unfortunately, a lot of her scenes—including a pivotal scene where she confronts Ambassador MacWhite—were deleted from the released version as they didn't add to the story.

After her contract with Universal expired, Reiko returned to the theater in various stage productions of *Kismet*, *The King and I*, and *Mata Hari*. An ankle injury ended Reiko's career as a dancer, so Marlon hired

Reiko Sato and Marlon Brando in The Ugly American (1963).

Reiko Sato in Flower Drum Song (1961).

her as his informal secretary. Anyone who knew Marlon was aware that he preferred hiring friends to handle his business affairs, as he found them more trustworthy than strangers. Reiko's first task was being the caretaker of Marlon's island, Tetiaroa, as he had plans of turning it into a resort. It was important that somebody stay there for tax purposes and to keep others from migrating on the island. The experience was a nightmare for her. There was no plumbing or electricity. She had cans of Sternos around her to keep mice away. She was raped by pirates. She ran out of food and had to fish. She was concerned that she'd never leave the island, but help eventually arrived. For weeks, she was furious with Marlon, cursing and screaming at him and telling him to never do that to her again. She'd later warn others about him, how he studies someone's weaknesses, and how he takes advantage of those weaknesses.

Roger Vergin, a friend of Marlon Brando's who'd later write about him, remembered Reiko's ordeal on the island: "Weeks passed and no one came to check on her... it was not a matter of just picking up a telephone and ordering a boat to take her home. Had that been possible, she would have been long gone. The problem was that there was no means of communication. Brando's priorities had not included Reiko's safety. As Reiko looked across the ocean to Tahiti in the moonlight, she would think about starting a big fire on the beach. That would bring someone to investigate. The sad truth was that Brando simply forgot about her. Eventually, Brando did remember to check and eventually a boat came."

Reiko Sato's later years were spent at Marlon Brando's estate. He'd support her in exchange by having her do various things like babysitting his son and being the liaison between him and his ex-wife Anna Kashfi. He rented a house for Reiko on Mulholland Drive, which was situated behind a mansion. She didn't have a lot of things, and she slept on a futon in the living room. It was the way she liked living. Her days were spent with friends and fellow entertainers like Nobuko Miyamoto, Alvin Ing, and Larry Hama.

Reiko Sato in The Teahouse of the August Moon.

Reiko Sato in Kismet (1955).

Dennis O'Keefe, Ann Sheridan, Victor Sen Yung and Reiko Sato in Woman on the Run (1950).

In the 1970s, she took an extended vacation to Mexico where she endured a midlife crisis. The rumors included that she had two annulled marriages, as well as a serious romance with a fighter known as Robes. It was after returning to Hollywood that she began writing, producing, directing, and starring in a self-funded film titled *Now It Can Be Told*. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough money to complete it and there are no copies in existence.

On May 3, 1981, Reiko's landlord stopped by to check on her since nobody had heard from her for days. He walked in and saw that she was on the floor suffering from what seemed to be a seizure. He dialed 911 and an ambulance rushed her to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. Marlon, Koji, and Koji's wife Kayko flew there to be at her side. Alice Marchak remembers the whole ordeal: "I was in my office when I heard Marlon burst through the front door. He was breathless and sweating profusely. He told me that he hadn't heard from Reiko in days, and he was worried that something was wrong. It was his intuition. I immediately dialed her landlord, who lived in the house in front of hers, and asked him to see if she was all right."

The underlying cause of her seizure was never determined, but her close friend Noel Robin, whom she attended Los Angeles Community College with, had this to say: "I had lunch with Reiko months before she died. When we sat down, I noticed that there were bandages wrapped around her head. I asked her about it, and she told me that she slipped in the shower and knocked the back of her head on one of those soap holders that jut out of the wall. She wasn't the type of person to see a doctor about it, though. It's possible that incident caused some kind of hemorrhage."

Her brother Koji made the decision, days after her hospitalization and against Marlon's wishes, to take her off life support. Reiko Sato died on May 28, 1981, at the age of 49. She left behind a lasting legacy among family, friends, and fans, with nobody having anything bad to say about her. The funeral was an intimate gathering, and the eulogy was done by none other than Marlon himself who, according to Nancy Kwan, was very animated during his speech. Marlon, who wouldn't appear in another film for a decade, returned home, took some nearby Pan American Airways stationary, and penned a note to his good friend George Englund expressing his grief: "Just came from funeral services for Reiko, and wanted to spill a little, I guess. She was so naturally gentle and warming... not more than eleven people to fare her well, of those no one really loved her and maybe four were really touched by the ending. That was the end of thirty-one funny little bittersweet years."